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WHAT THE WEST WANTS IN PREPARATORY ENGLISH

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I have often wished that the term preparatory, together with the ideas that cluster about it, might be dropped for a season from our educational vocabulary. My aversion to the term arises from a conviction that it is in part responsible for one of the most serious of educational fallacies, or if not directly responsible, serves at any rate to keep the fallacy in countenance. The fallacy to which I refer is the prevalent belief that the chief purpose of secondary English is to prepare the student to enter the university.

I question whether any secondary study can be taught most successfully when it is pursued with that sole end in view, though in regard to history, science, and foreign languages, I yield to the authority of others. With reference to English, at any rate, I have no doubts; I am sure that the mental attitude on the part of either teacher or pupil which keeps the eye fixed on the university gate, which leads the teacher to test his teaching and the pupil to test his progress mainly by the question whether it meets the formal entrance requirements, is an unfortunate attitude which cannot fail to lower the value of the study. It is akin to the religious doctrine that entrance to Heaven can be gained by the performance of certain stated ceremonies, no matter what one's behavior has been in other regards.

In the West, where entrance is almost entirely upon certificate, the evil is minimized to a considerable extent. If a student, destined to enter a state university, is in an approved high school, the question of preparation need not be raised, except in a general way. In our western state systems, as is well known, one broad highway stretches from the kindergarten to the graduate school. All that is required for admission to the university is that the candidate keep in the middle of the road. By following this simple injunction, he finds himself in course of time on the university campus. But in the East, where entrance requirements mean entrance examinations, preparatory English is a different thing. It is the English which will enable candidates to pass the examination. Its substance, its

methods, and its arrangement in the curriculum are largely determined by the accidents, so to speak, of the entrance requirements.

Nor is this without its effect upon the West. There are in every large western high school a few pupils who are being prepared for eastern colleges. To meet the needs of these pupils the teacher must to some extent conform to eastern methods.

Still further, there has been an earnest attempt of late to bring the East and the West together in the matter of requirements, in order to secure essential uniformity of subject-matter and mode of study. As a result of this movement the attitude of the western teacher has either insensibly conformed to that of the eastern teacher, or has come into more or less embarrassing conflict with it.

Thus the West has been compelled by the course of events to face a problem which was not of its own creating, and from which, following its own methods, it would naturally be exempt. Since, however, the West has become thus involved, it is not improper for a representative of that region to seek to analyze the peculiar situation, to point out its dangers, and to suggest a remedy.

The effects of what I have called the preparatory fallacy may be distinguished as the effect upon the teacher, upon the pupil, and upon the course of study. I will speak briefly of these in turn, not attempting an exhaustive analysis, but rather singling out in each case the most striking characteristics.

First, then, what is its effect upon the teacher? Out of a variety of influences, I will mention but one, though an extremely important one—its tendency to debase the teacher's standard of values. Professor James has said recently that the highest reward which modern education can bestow upon any individual is the ability to estimate the worth of his fellow-men—the ability to detect instantly, under whatever disguises, the useful citizen, the incorruptible politician, the efficient man of affairs. I would apply a similar test to the equipment of the secondary teacher of English. I would say that his most precious endowment as a teacher is his ability to estimate the personal, intrinsic worth and promise of the students under his direction. Valuable as this gift is to all teachers, it is of peculiar value to the teacher of English, not only because through this subject he comes into closer personal contact with his students than can the teacher of any other subject, but because such personal contact is the only means by which the subject can be taught at all. His main business, we may say, is not simply to teach a language,

it is to develop human personality—to draw it out, to give it freedom of expression, and, when it has thus been developed, to know it through and through and to estimate it in and for itself. It is the duty and privilege of the teacher of English, far beyond that of any other teacher, to exercise the prophetic function, that is, to detect in the feeble, straggling plant of the present the promise of the bright consummate flower which is to unfold in later years in a different environment. This, I say, is his function and his opportunity; but if, instead of keeping his eyes upon his students' progress and estimating their worth by the growth of their personalities, the teacher is compelled to keep one eye on his class and the other on a set of examination questions, what will be the natural consequence? Is he not likely to acquire a squint? Is not his sense of personal values likely to be confused? I submit that such a result is almost inevitable. With the best intentions in the world, he will gradually cease to apply the standard of personal worth; he will learn to apply the standard of conformity to a more or less conventional requirement. As a result of this failure of the inward vision he may give up educating; he may begin just to prepare, even to coach.

I do not mean to bring this as a railing accusation against eastern teachers of English. Doubtless the sense for personal value is on the average as high in the East as it is in the West. But no one can deny, I think, that certain eastern teachers are much more preoccupied with the problem of getting particular boys into particular universities than are any western teachers. It is my observation that the burden of preparation weighs heavily upon them. And why should it not when failure to get a candidate through the university gate is accounted as little less than a crime? It would be strange, indeed, if this continual pressure did not sooner or later make crooked the teacher's standard of judgment.

If, now, we ask what secondary English means to the pupil, especially to the pupil who is looking toward a university career, we shall have no difficulty in tracing the baneful effect of the preparatory idea. There is the phrase "required reading," for example. Is it well that young persons should be led to think of literary appreciation as a "required" something? To my mind the very sound of the phrase is ominous and depressing, as if one should say required wonder, required reverence, required enjoyment. If I were asked to devise a method of quenching the proper interest

of high-school pupils in their English work or of so transforming their interest as to defeat the ends of sound education, I am sure I could find no better plan than to convince them that the main object of their study was to meet the entrance requirements. Such a conviction often cuts the heart out of the work, as many a teacher will testify.

I shall not soon forget the pathetic remark of a very earnest young candidate whom I met this summer and, to whom I lent a copy of *Little Dorrit*. He returned it next day with the remark that he was afraid he would become interested in it. "You know," he added, rather sadly, "I am preparing for the entrance examinations at ——— University, and *Little Dorrit* is not on the list."

There are persons to whom this will seem to be an extreme case, yet I believe that it is fairly typical of a large body of secondary pupils—and teachers as well—for whom "English A" and "English B" have acquired the abstractness of algebraic symbols.

The effect of the preparatory fallacy upon the course of study is no less obvious. It is exhibited in a variety of ways, but perhaps the most serious aspect of it is the upsetting of the natural order of studies in order to turn the senior year into a purely preparatory or coaching period. Books which were read and, we may hope, enjoyed in the Freshman and Sophomore years, and which now have been properly forgotten, must be brought out and laboriously reread. The answers to the old questions must be committed to memory: Whether the Vicar preferred the blue bed to the brown, and why; the numbers of the *Spectator* in which the Sir Roger de Coverly papers appeared; the color of the gown worn by the cardinal in *Quentin Durward*; Is a barbarous age more favorable to the production of great poetry than an age of refinement?

It is a dreary process, but what else can be done? To attempt to bring back the first fine careless rapture, if happily there was one, would be absurd. Besides, the entrance requirements do not call for it. They call for facts, or else for delicate critical discriminations, outlines of plots, and pallid little essays on the character of Dunston Cass.

It is not uncommon, I believe, for the course of study to be so arranged that the entire list of books called for by the entrance requirements shall be either read or reviewed, and shall certainly be written about, in the senior year—this, as it seems to me, in defiance

of accepted principles of education and the suggestions of common-sense.

The same influence has been, at least in part, responsible for the unfortunate entanglement, in the preparatory schedule, of literature and composition. That any great gain comes to the student either in literary appreciation or in the command of his mother-tongue from the incessant writing of outlines of plots, critical estimates which ape maturity, or characterless sketches of character, has not, I believe, been demonstrated. On the other hand, it is the experience of most teachers with whom I have discussed the question, that such essays, especially as they appear in examination papers, are for the most part the merest fluff and ravelings of the adolescent mind, revealing neither the student's independent thought, nor, except casually, his command of English. They came into existence, I have been told, as a convenience for the examiner, who thus thought to combine in one paper questions on both sides of the pupil's training. The combination represents an accident of preparation, not an essential of secondary study.

Take the outlining of plots, for example. Valuable as is the practice of retelling a story in one's own words, when there is some object in it, as when it is directed to eager listeners or readers, there is still reason to doubt whether the reduction of dramas, or of the larger works of fiction, to bare synopses, is a wholly profitable exercise, especially where it is pursued systematically and mercilessly as it is in some schools. The results of such work are likely to be either juiceless "chankings"—if I may use a provincialism—or ludicrously inadequate attempts to hit off the style and spirit of the original. Moreover the plots of some of the best reading in the world are such as nobody wants to outline. Did anyone, I wonder, ever derive satisfaction from an outline of *As You Like It*? Not I, at any rate. Some years ago I attempted to read a number of exercises on that theme written by fairly able secondary students, but after the first half-dozen I gave the task over, fearing that if I continued I should lose all respect for the constructive art of Shakespeare. Or, to take another example, a work which I read with great enjoyment when I was young was the romance of *Don Quixote*. It is a book which every boy delights in and eagerly appropriates to himself. But would anyone, except a hard-driven teacher of English, expect profit to arise from outlining the plot of that incomparable piece of fiction? To ask the question is to answer

it. For my part, I am sure that I could no more outline the plot of that book than I could manipulate an aeroplane; and if I could, what good would it do?

But I will not prolong the enumeration of these evil conditions. Let us look on the obverse of the medal. Assume for the moment that the word preparatory has been dropped from the vocabulary of education. Suppose that instead of speaking of preparatory English we are to speak of educative English, or gainful English, or profitable English. Suppose, further, that the sole question which secondary teachers of this subject are compelled to ask themselves is just this: What course of instruction in English will contribute most to the pupil's mind and character, and to his powers of appreciation, expression, and communication? What would be the effect of so radical a change?

Its most important result and the only one that I shall consider, is that it would set the teacher free from prescription and routine. It would grant to him *Lehrfreiheit*, and give him opportunity to develop a more individual mode of teaching. It would enlarge his resources. In his choice of books for reading and study he would no longer be confined to a pitiful little list, selected often on grounds of convenience, or copyright, by persons of tastes and inclinations perhaps alien to his own; he could select at will out of the great storehouse of English and American literature the books which he had found by experience to be best fitted to his peculiar mode of instruction and to the needs of his pupils. He could arrange this reading in the order of chronology, or of relative difficulty, or in any other way that he chose. He could follow the path of his own interest and knowledge, and make his teaching contributory to his scholarship.

Such an emancipation of the teacher would throw upon him full responsibility for the pupils' gain or loss. He could no longer take refuge behind the entrance requirements and say, "I have been bidden to do thus and so. I have done it. Here are the beggarly results." He would be his pupils' keeper, answerable to his own conscience and to the world for the use he had made of his trusteeship.

But it may be asked, and with reason, what rights the institution of higher education retains when it has given up this prescription of particular books and particular methods of preparing students for examination. My answer is, that it would retain the privilege which

it has always had, of training secondary teachers for their duties, of giving them high ideals, of co-operating with them in their plans, of stimulating and encouraging them to do their utmost by reposing confidence in them. It would also, I suppose, retain, or assume, the privilege which we have long had in the West, of inspecting the teacher's work, of making suggestions for the improvement of it, and, perhaps most important of all, of testing the tree by its fruits as they ripen in the university atmosphere.

I am aware that this proposal will be received in some quarters with disapproval, not to say horror. The opinion is held by many eastern teachers that the only conserving force in secondary education, at least in the New England states, is the entrance examinations at certain universities. Graduates of these universities have said to me, with bated breath, that if the examinations were suspended, the whole system of secondary education would collapse and fall to the ground, like a bean-stalk when the pole is removed. For my part, I should hesitate to bring so serious a charge against eastern secondary teachers. I should hesitate to say that they are so lacking in conscience and independence of character that they can be kept to their work only by the lash of the taskmaster. I am unwilling to believe that this serfdom exists in the secondary schools either in the East or in the West. It is another educational fallacy. Some day somebody with a big ax will cut down the totem-pole which now stands in front of the eastern university. When it falls, there will be great consternation. The worshipers will cower and hide in crevices of the rocks, and wait for the offended deities to launch their thunderbolts. But nothing will happen. The deities will be on a journey, or peradventure asleep. Secondary education, after a little season of readjustment, will go on as usual. The good schools and good teachers will turn out good material, the poor schools and poor teachers will turn out poor material. About the same proportion of each kind as at present will find its way into the university. In course of time the poor schools will be discredited and will be compelled to do better work or go out of business. The good schools will be rewarded by increased confidence. I do not pretend to know when this transformation will take place, but that it will come in the fulness of time, I have not the slightest doubt.

If, however, the change of front which I have suggested is for the present impracticable, are there not some particulars in which the uniform requirements can be so modified as at once to improve the

instruction and to avoid a conflict between eastern and western ideals and methods? Since the problem is now being carefully studied by a committee of the Joint Conference on Entrance Requirements, I will not attempt to forestall their conclusions. But I will throw out a few suggestions.

In the first place, as I have already hinted, I am sure there would be a great gain if a vertical line could be drawn through the secondary curriculum between literature on one side, and composition on the other. Not that these two subjects fail in vital relationships and points of contact, but that the artificial alliance enforced by the terms of the entrance requirements and the character of the examinations has resulted in the evil conditions pointed out before. What I would suggest is that we put in one course of study literature and so much of critical theory and literary history as the pupil must have for the rational appreciation of what he reads; and that we put in another course of study training in composition, and so much grammatical and rhetorical theory as the pupil needs for the rationalizing of that discipline. Carry these two studies along side by side, letting one touch the other only when it can give light and life and stimulus. In the entrance examination apply two quite different tests—one to determine how much the pupil has profited by his enjoyment of literature and how much literary history he has learned; the other to determine how clearly he can express himself on some subject in which he is undeniably interested and on which he is sure to have some definite information to impart. Above all, seek to invent a method of examination which will make unprofitable and ridiculous a process of coaching and cramming in the senior year. Let us assume, once for all, that candidates will, must, and should appear ignorant of much that they have read, digested, and assimilated in the earlier years of the secondary course.

In the second place, let us try to imagine boys and girls as they actually are, not as they pedagogically ought to be. One would gather from the terms in which entrance requirements are often phrased that the graduates of preparatory schools are candidates for the doctor's degree. They are expected to be ripe scholars, exact observers, skilled logicians, cultured critics, and masters of the English language in all particulars.

I have phrased such requirements myself, and I therefore have no hesitation in saying that the expectation of such results from the years of secondary schooling is the impossible dream of pedants.

Not one in one hundred thousand, not one in a million, of those who are entitled to begin their university career, could meet these exactions.

However we may phrase our entrance requirements, let us face the actual conditions. The real boy at the conclusion of his preparatory course is, and in most cases of a right ought to be, a comparatively unformed, wayward, impulsive young savage. He is a divine savage, to be sure, often full of fine impulses, and always, let us hope, worth the labor which it will cost to educate him. But he is without mature judgment, without settled purpose, without exact knowledge, in many cases with a memory that is marble to receive and wax to retain. To expect him to be otherwise is to expect a miracle. If for the brief, spasmodic period of the entrance examination he presents a semblance of maturity in mind or character, the appearance, in all but the rarest exceptions, is illusory. It is a fragile vestment which will presently crackle and fall away from him like a coating of paraffine. In his English, at any rate, let us take him as he really is; let us see if we cannot in this delectable study, whose very essence is sincerity and candor, do away with all pretense, affectation, and artificiality. It will be better for the teacher, and it will be infinitely better for the pupil.

I have recently been reading over again the reports of the Harvard Committee on English Composition, in which a number of examination papers are reproduced in facsimile, and the distorted English of the writers is almost indecently exposed. Upon this same English there is much sarcastic comment in the committee's report, and the exhibits seem to justify it; but for my part I could not view these reelings and writhings of the adolescent mind without a feeling of pity. It was all so unreal. Back of this mess and confusion were genuine individuals with likes and dislikes, with budding ambitions, with tingling senses, with impulses toward right and wrong. Where did these individuals come in when judgment was passed upon their faulty English? What were they trying to do? What motives lay behind these queer antics of the pen? If only one could tear away the swathings, set the imprisoned spirits free, and interrogate them, a strange new light might be thrown upon the causes of bad English.

Another thought occurred to me as I read the reports. Should we not—at least those of us who are pragmatic philosophers—apply to the young offenders the crucial test of pragmatism? Where are

they now, the writers of these rejected addresses? Are they in jail? Are they social outcasts? Are they editing yellow journals, or in other ways defiling the well of English? Or are they eloquent preachers, successful lawyers, persuasive insurance agents, leaders of society? I do not wish to pursue inquiries which may overturn the pedagogical foundations, but I am frankly curious to learn how far the actual course of events will bear out judgments based upon such evidence.

In the third place, the entrance requirements should throw the emphasis upon the things which are of most importance. It is of course necessary that our young people should spell and punctuate properly, should make the verb agree with its subject, should use words in their dictionary senses and write sentences that can be read aloud without causing unnecessary pain to the mandibles. They should also know the meanings of the words in the poetry and prose that they read, and understand the allusions to things ancient and modern. But these matters, after all, are subsidiary and must be treated as such. They are means to an end. To treat them as an end in and for themselves is to turn education in this subject upside down. The main purpose of training in composition is free speech, direct and sincere communion with our fellows, that swift and untrammelled exchange of opinion, feeling, and experience, which is the working instrument of the social instinct and the motive power of civilization. The teacher of composition who does not somehow make his pupils realize this and feel that all of the verbal machinery is but for the purpose of fulfilling this great end, is false to his trust.

Again, the end of reading is, I take it, the widening of the mental, emotional, and imaginative horizon through contact with the creations of great literary artists. The sudden happy glow of emotion, the unbidden tear, the quick kindling of the young fancy, the awakening to the loveliness of nature, the refining and purging of the senses, the conviction of the validity of great principles of conduct, the realization of the inevitable tragedy of life—these are the priceless rewards of the appreciative reading of great literature. Whatever else is taught in the classes in literature, is subsidiary to these ends. To allow other considerations to get in their way, to obscure them, to take their place, is—I say it reverently—to commit a sin against the Holy Ghost.

I would not have the small things in secondary English overlooked or despised, but I would not on the other hand have them

magnified into great things. And if it were necessary to choose between the two—which fortunately it is not—I would myself much prefer the blundering writer hungry for communion with his fellows, or the blundering reader full of callow enthusiasms for Dickens and Longfellow, to the facile cynic or the cock-sure criticaster.

Perhaps I can condense all that I have been trying to say into the assertion that what the West wants in preparatory English is sympathetic, broad-minded, well-trained teachers. If such teachers can be secured, we are willing to trust them implicitly. We desire to co-operate with them and to give them all possible help and encouragement, we wish to know what they are doing, and we expect them to know what we are doing, and what are our needs and ideals. But we do not wish to hamper them by petty dictation or impose upon them conditions which will interfere with the development of their individual methods of instruction. We will leave to them the working-out of the details of the curriculum. We will judge them by the characters of the boys and girls whom they send to us. Give us good teachers, and good students will follow as the night the day.